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SHORT STORIES

THE STUFF OF CRIME by Joyce Porter	5
A KILLING AT EL CASTILLO by Kenneth Gavrell	21
MERRY CHRISTMAS, NORIKO by Ron Butler	41
BAD TIMES by Gary Alexander	58
A LESSON FOR BODKIN by Edward Wellen	71
THE NIGHT I GOT SHOT by Robert Twohy	73
THE SNOOP by Jeffry Scott	82
THE RETURN OF CARDULA by Jack Ritchie	97
CARLOS' PERFECT CRIME by Franklin Bandy	106

MOVIES AND TELEVISION

CRIME ON SCREEN by Peter Christian	120
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 27, No. 2, February 3, 1982. Published 13 times a year, every 28 days, by Davis Publications, Inc., at \$1.25 a copy. Annual subscription \$16.25 in the U.S.A. and possessions; \$18.50 elsewhere payable in advance in U.S. funds. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 1932, Marion, O. 43305. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. © 1981 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Printed in U.S.A. All submissions must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. ISSN: 0002-5224.

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Albert's body had been discovered under the stands at the stadium . . .

THE RETURN OF CARDULA

by
JACK
RITCHIE



"Albert's last words were 'No snow.'"

I frowned thoughtfully. People do seem to babble the oddest things when they depart this world. Especially murder victims. "What were the weather conditions at the time of Albert's death?" I asked.

"The temperature was in the low seventies. You couldn't *buy* snow on a night like that."

Which reminded me. "Now be utterly honest with me, sir. In the

vernacular of the underworld, snow often refers to drugs of one kind or another. Were you and Albert by any chance involved in drugs?"

His expression indicated that he was clearly above that sort of thing. "We wouldn't touch anything that heavy. We were just ordinary thieves."

I had arrived at my office at nine P.M.

I closed the window against the night air, hung up my cape, and proceeded to unlock the door to my waiting room.

I found a client already seated there. I always leave the door between my waiting room and the hall unlocked. He seemed startled to see me. "Were you inside there all the time?"

I smiled economically. "Have you been out here long?"

"About twenty minutes."

He was a small man of middle years with blinking eyes and a nervous manner. He studied me dubiously, as people have a tendency to do when they first meet me. "Are you Cardula?"

"Yes." I showed him into my office and offered him a chair.

He sat down. "I finally couldn't stand it any longer. I decided that I ought to see a private detective and find out what could be done. I was going to go the first thing tomorrow morning, but when I looked up names in the phone book I saw that your display ad said Night Hours, so I decided to come here right away and get it over with." He hesitated. "Is a private eye something like a priest or a lawyer? I mean if you tell him something does he keep it to himself?"

"Sir, I assure you that anything you have to tell me will travel no further."

That satisfied him. "My name is Walter Pierce. I'd like you to solve a murder."

"Sir," I said, "I do not wish to discourage business, but the regular police possess the numbers, the expertise, and the communications needed to handle matters as grave as murder. Contrary to popular belief, private detectives rarely, if ever, deal with murder."

"But the police still haven't found the murderer and I don't think they ever will."

"When did this murder occur?"

"About two months ago."

"And the victim?"

"Albert Marshall. Albert and me were partners. We were together for

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more than thirty years. In jail and out. Mostly in. We'd get caught together, serve time together, and get paroled together."

Naturally I wanted to hear more about that. "Jail?"

He nodded. "The fact of the matter is that Albert and me were thieves. Mostly burglary, but also whatever else came along. That's why we were at the ball park. Not to see the game—we never even read the sports pages of the newspapers—but to go through the locker rooms while the players were out on the field. You know, scoop up anything we could lay our hands on—watches, wallets, rings, anything that looked valuable."

"Wouldn't you expect to find somebody in the rooms watching the players' possessions?"

"Sometimes there'd be somebody there and sometimes not. Whenever we found anybody, we'd just pretend we were lost and walk out again."

He rubbed his jaw. "Well, this time we did things a little different because of the layout. There was this long low corridor, like a tunnel, under the stands leading to the locker rooms and it made a turn. If we both went in there and something happened that we didn't expect we could get trapped. So we decided that one of us would stay at the entrance, like a lookout, and the other would go inside and do the job. If anybody showed up while Albert was at work, I'd stall him long enough so Albert could finish up inside and get out of there."

Pierce sighed. "So I stood there and watched Albert disappear down the corridor. And two minutes later I saw Albert again—only this time he had one hand tight against his chest and he was staggering. He came back up to me, his eyes wide, and said, 'No snow.' Then he dropped dead at my feet.

"At first I thought it was a heart attack, but then I saw the hole in his chest. There wasn't much blood—just around the edges of the wound and on Albert's hand. What I figure happened is that somebody was there in the locker room, only Albert didn't know it. When he saw Albert going through the lockers collecting, this unknown person grabbed a gun and fired."

"Did you hear the shot?"

"No. Where I was standing the noise from the fans must have drowned it out. So there I was with Albert's body, but I couldn't go to the police because I hadn't reported to my parole officer for over a year and that could get me into a lot of trouble. So I just had to leave Albert lying there and let somebody else find his body."

Pierce shook his head sadly. "Albert was even smaller than I am and weighed ten pounds less. You could have said boo and Albert would have dropped everything and run like a rabbit. There wasn't no cause to shoot him."

Now I vaguely remembered reading a newspaper item about the body of a man being found in a corridor under the stands at the County Stadium. The police had speculated that he might have been the victim of a robbery attempt that went awry.

I reflected. "If Albert was shot by someone in the locker room, why didn't that person come forward and admit as much? I don't remember reading anything to that effect in the newspapers."

Pierce smiled thinly. "Nobody ever came forward. Whoever shot Albert wasn't too proud of what he'd done. Maybe because it was really murder. I was hoping the police would find him, but since that doesn't look likely any more I decided to come to you and see if anything can be done about it."

"Whose locker room had Albert been rifling? The home team's or the visitors'?"

"The home team. If everything went right we were going to go through the visitors' next."

When Pierce left, I pondered. Who had killed Albert? A locker-room attendant? Or perhaps even a player who had lagged behind for some reason? A visit to the stadium might be in order.

I found the evening's newspaper in the waiting room and turned to the sports pages. Ah, good, there was a game tonight.

It was approximately four miles to the County Stadium—as the crow flies, so to speak—and when I arrived I descended to a dark spot behind the last seats in the upper grandstand.

I studied the playing field far below. Even with my ultra-keen eyesight I could barely distinguish the numbers on the backs of the players. Clearly I had to get a better view.

I strode down the ramp to the lower grandstand and then down the aisle to the box seats near the diamond. I found two empty seats and took one of them, which gave me an excellent close view of the players. I purchased a score card and settled down to observe. A beer vendor passed and I was sorely tempted—however, I am on a strict high-protein diet.

I am by no means a baseball aficionado—however, I am not totally

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ignorant of the game. I have, through occasional video viewing, natural curiosity, and longevity, acquired at least a working knowledge of the game and even recognition of certain of the more important individuals in the sport.

From the scoreboard in left field, I learned that I had entered the stadium in the last half of the sixth inning. The home team led the Yankees, 4 to 2, and was at bat. There were two outs, Gary on first base, and Seiler at bat.

I noticed that I was drawing some attention from those seated about me. Perhaps I should have worn one of my sports jackets rather than the red-lined cape.

Seiler walked on four pitched balls, putting men on first and second. Monson stepped into the batter's box and swung at the first pitch. He sent a fly ball to Winfield, the Yankee left fielder, and that ended the inning.

I now became aware of a middle-aged couple standing in the aisle glowering at me. They remained thus for a few moments more and then departed. However, they soon returned, this time accompanied by an usher.

He regarded me sternly. "Are you sure you got the right seat, mister? These people think you're in one of theirs and they got the ticket stubs to prove it."

The pair nodded confirmation and held up their stubs. "We had car trouble and just got here," the man said.

I managed to look perplexed. "Isn't this Section Eight?"

Obviously it was not and the usher said, "Nope."

I rose immediately. "My apologies, madam and sir. I seem to have made an error."

I left them and wandered up and down the aisles until I found another vacant seat in Section Five.

The Yankees went down one-two-three in the top half of the seventh.

I now found the same usher who had accosted me before at my side. This time he was accompanied by a policeman.

The usher spoke. "I been watching you, mister. This ain't Section Eight either."

I blinked surprise. "It isn't?"

"No. Let's see your ticket stub. If you paid to get in here, you got a ticket stub."

I searched several of my pockets and then chuckled. "I seem to have lost my stub. It was here just a moment ago." Then I appealed to his reason. "Oh, well, what difference does it really make *which* seat I take? As long as it was empty."

The policeman took the opposite view. "Mister, no stub, no seat." He took me by the arm and began escorting me to the exit.

I could, of course, have tossed him, the usher, and several dozen of the interested spectators to the winds, but I detest being the center of attention. It brings a blush to my cheeks, which can be quite a strain.

The policeman guided me all the way down the exit ramp and out of the stadium before he released his hold.

"For shame, mister. You look like you got money and still you sneak into the stadium."

When he disappeared, I walked to the ticket windows only to discover that they were all closed. Nevertheless, I reentered the stadium, this time finding a place under the roof of the upper grandstand.

The score was still 4 to 2 and remained that way as the inning ended. The Yankees trotted in for their turn at the plate and our team took the field. I watched our pitcher, a young left hander, wind up and throw the first ball of the eighth inning. A perfect strike.

Then I blinked and nearly lost my grip on the rafter.

I stared at the pitcher as he threw a slider for strike two.

So *that* was it.

In the top half of the ninth, Piniella hit a home run for the Yankees with nobody on, but it wasn't enough and they lost the game 4 to 3.

After the game I remained in the area waiting for the players to show, change to mufti, and exit.

When they did, some of them went to private automobiles in the parking lot and others to the team bus.

I followed the bus closely as it made its way out of the lot and onto the freeway. It took the team back downtown and debarked them at the Atkinson Hotel.

I managed to be in the same elevator which took Monson, the pitcher, up to the twelfth floor. When he unlocked the door of his room, I shouldered in before he could close it again. He backed up, startled. "Who are you?"

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I proffered my card and he glanced at it without touching. I smiled. "I am here to see that justice is done."

He swallowed. "Justice? What justice?"

"Oh, come now, sir. You know perfectly well that I am referring to the murder of one Albert Marshall on an evening two months ago at the County Stadium."

His face paled.

I was rather proud of my deductions and now I proceeded to expound. "Let me refresh your memory, sir. On that night two months ago, you were pitching. However, you were not at your best. You were shelled from the mound and sent to the showers. Being sent to the showers can be interpreted literally or figuratively, depending upon the manager of a team. And your manager was literal. You descended into the bowels of the stadium to the locker room. You removed your uniform.

"I deduce that you had just finished your shower and were still in the shower room toweling yourself when Albert Marshall entered the adjoining locker room, his mission being to pilfer anything portable. If you had been still showering, Marshall would have heard the water running and fled immediately.

"As you reentered the locker room you saw Marshall at work. You sneaked to your locker, removed a pistol from therein, made your presence known, and shot him."

Monson sank slowly into a chair.

I smiled grimly. "Marshall was sorely wounded, but still had the strength to flee. And then suddenly the full realization of what you had done struck you. Even if the man was a thief caught in the act, why does a six-foot-three-inch two-hundred-pound man in the prime of life find it necessary to use a weapon against a middle-aged five-foot thief? It might possibly even be considered murder. You could get into real trouble if you admitted the shooting. So you decided to say nothing at all."

Monson sighed heavily and shook his head. "No. It wasn't like that. It was an accident. The gun didn't even belong to me. It's Seiler's. He has the locker next to mine and he collects guns. He just bought that one for his collection. I didn't know it was loaded and I never held a pistol before in my life. I was just going to point the gun, but I guess it had a hair trigger or maybe I was just too nervous and it went off.

"I was really stunned when it happened. I just stood there, not knowing what to do or think when he staggered out. I was still in shock when the

team came in after the game. And then I learned that he was dead and the police thought he was the victim of a holdup attempt.”

Monson looked me full in the eye. "I was going to go to the police and tell them what happened, but then all kinds of other thoughts came to my mind. Like this is my first year in the majors and we're pennant contenders. And all my life I dreamed about pitching in a World Series. So I finally decided I'd say nothing until the end of the season or the World Series, whichever came last. And *then* I'd go to the police and be ready to go to jail, if that was in the cards. But now that you know what happened, I guess I'd better go to the police right now."

I thought over his words. "You say the team is a pennant contender?"

He nodded. "With any luck at all, we'll make it."

I pondered a bit more, pacing back and forth a few times while he watched. Then I came to a decision. "Well, perhaps it won't do any actual harm if you waited until the end of the season or the World Series."

He brightened. "You really think so?"

"You have my permission."

The next evening, I was waiting in my office when Pierce appeared.

He listened while I related the previous night's events and then became reflective. "You really think he'll go to the police after the World Series?"

"Yes, I believe so. He seemed quite sincere to me. I think we can trust him," I said.

"How old is he?"

"I'd guess about twenty-one or -two."

Pierce mulled a bit more. "Well, if it had been murder, like I thought, that would be one thing. But if it was an accident, I can't see what good it will do for the kid to report to the police. I mean it can't do Albert any good. He's dead. And Monson is still a young man. He could ruin his whole life and career. Maybe he should just keep his mouth shut forever and let sleeping dogs lie."

I smiled. "My sentiments exactly. I will speak to him again."

Pierce now asked the question for which I had been waiting. "How did you manage to pinpoint Monson? After all, there are a lot of other players who could have done it."

I chuckled. “When Monson undressed for the showers, I suspect that he tossed, flung, or otherwise draped his uniform shirt over the edge of his open locker door. The name Monson in lower case *and* upside down,

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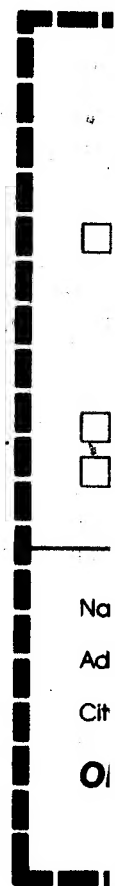
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means nothing. However, in upper case—as it appeared on his uniform—and upside down, it becomes NOSNOW.

“As you said, Albert knew absolutely nothing about baseball or he might have recognized Monson. But all he saw was someone standing next to a uniform shirt which carried the letters NOSNOW. As far as Albert was concerned, that could very well have been the player’s name. When he conveyed that information to you, he chose to pronounce it ‘No snow,’ which is as reasonably as any.”

After Pierce left, I locked the office and went off to the County Stadium. This time I wore my sports jacket and bought a ticket.

We beat the Yankees again, 6 to 1.

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